PROTEST AGAINST THE EXECUTION OF IRISH PRISONERS OF WAR

REMARKS

OF

HON. JAMES D. PHELAN

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE

SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MAY 22, 1916

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HON. JAMES D. PHELAN.

PROTEST AGAINST THE EXECUTION OF IRISH PRISONERS OF WAR.

Mr. PHELAN. I beg to present to the Senate a telegram and correspondence in the nature of a memorial by the most representative American Irish society of San Francisco, which carries on the traditions of such societies as the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, organized in Revolutionary days, of which George Washington himself was an honorary member. I have received many communications on the subject, but I have singled this one out with my reply, as indicating the condition of public sentiment, so far as these societies and our fellow citizens of Irish extraction are concerned. I consider their plea worthy the attention of the Senate of the United States. I ask that this correspondence may be printed in the RECORD and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations.

The VICE PRESIDENT. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The matter referred to is as follows:

[Telegram.]

SAN FRANCISCO, CAL., *May 19, 1916.*

Hon. JAMES D. PHELAN,
United States Senate:

We have sent the following telegram to President Wilson. Will you, as a fellow member of the Knights of St. Patrick, kindly request him to give it early consideration:

"The Knights of St. Patrick of San Francisco, an organization composed of American citizens, now in the forty-second year of its existence, respectfully requests that you request the British Government to exercise all possible clemency in behalf of Irish prisoners who are now or who may hereafter be under arrest in connection with the recent uprising in Ireland to the end that secret trials and secret executions and severe sentences of imprisonment may cease. This request is made on behalf of numberless American citizens whose ancestry, like your own, is Irish. In behalf of American friends and relatives of those concerned in the Irish uprising and as Secretary of State, John Sherman, in the protest of the United States to Spain against reconcentration in Cuba in 1897, said: 'In the name of common humanity, as precedents which justify your friendly interposition in the present emergency, we would

43420—15729

cite the letter of Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State, to Governour Morris, minister to France, in 1793, requesting the release of Gen. Lafayette from imprisonment; the action of President Fillmore in conveying Kossuth in an American war vessel from Turkey to the United States; the communication of Secretary of State Seward, in 1867, to Mexico, in behalf of clemency for Maximilian; the communication of Secretary of State Fish, in 1872, to Spain, protesting against the death penalty being inflicted upon Cuban insurgents; the action of President Grant, in 1867, in obtaining a mitigation of the capital punishments of those convicted in the Canadian courts in connection with the Fenian uprising; the representations made by President Grant to England, in 1867, in behalf of the Irish prisoners in the Manchester case; and the numberless requests made by various Presidents of the United States to Russia for clemency in behalf of her Jewish subjects.' The only offense of the Irish revolutionists was the same aspiration for liberty which inspired Washington in the American Revolution. The extreme and unusual severity of their secret executions and imprisonments has deeply stirred and saddened the millions of American citizens who are proud of their Irish blood and who sympathize with every nation which strikes for liberty."

ROBERT P. TROY,
President Knights of St. Patrick.
RICHARD C. O'CONNOR,
Chairman Board of Trustees.
JOHN MULHERN,
Corresponding Secretary.

MAY 22, 1916.

Mr. ROBERT P. TROY,
President Knights of St. Patrick,
703 Market, San Francisco.

MY DEAR MR. TROY: Your telegram of May 19, concerning presidential protest to England in behalf of Ireland, is received.

I desire to say I am in full sympathy with your action, and have already communicated with the President. Protests have been made in several cases where the lives of American citizens of Irish birth have been in peril. Last Thursday night the President sent such a protest in the case of Lynch, a citizen of New York, at the instance of Senator O'GORMAN, and the day before I had a personal interview with Hon. Robert Lansing, Secretary of State, and Hon. Frank L. Polk, the counselor of the Department of State, urging that representations be made on the general subject.

Majority leader, Senator JOHN W. KERN, introduced a resolution in the Senate which I am supporting, requesting the State Department to formally act.

I am sure that the administration will do everything in its power to carry out the wishes of the Knights of St. Patrick.

Very truly yours,

JAMES D. PHELAN.
MAY 22, 1916.

To the PRESIDENT,
The White House.

MY DEAR MR. PRESIDENT: I have received a telegram from the Knights of St. Patrick, of San Francisco, communicating the one that they sent to you. They request me as follows:

"Will you, as a fellow member of the Knights of St. Patrick, kindly request the President to give early consideration to the telegram which we have sent him?"

43420—15729

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It is requested that this Government make representations to the British Government to the end that it shall exercise all possible clemency in behalf of Irish prisoners, to stop secret trials and secret executions, and to resort to the courts of law to determine the guilt or innocence of the parties and the measure and nature of the punishment, if any is decreed.

American citizens of Irish birth have been arrested and held without trial; and there are reports that one such citizen has been condemned by court-martial to capital punishment. In reenforcing the sentiments of the Knights of St. Patrick I can not too strongly urge that you comply with their request.

You have in the name of humanity protested to other foreign Governments against the recklessness of power. "The divine right of revolution" is inherent in every people; our independence was won under the leadership of that "immortal rebel," George Washington. It is true that those who fail in such an enterprise expose themselves to trial for treason. The Revolutionary fathers were all traitors in the eyes of the English law, but patriots in the eyes of the world.

"No treason succeeds, and what is the reason?
For when it succeeds, who dare call it treason?"

There is no excuse for treason in America, because the people are the sovereign and under the Constitution have a lawful and effective means of expressing their views. This is the right for which the unconquerable spirit of the Irish people has contended for centuries. It was conceded by Mr. Gladstone and recently by the present ministry of England. Its accomplishment was met with armed resistance on the part of the people of the north, by mutiny among the troops and insubordination among the officers of the British Army. This doubtless led to the futile attempt to accomplish by force what Parliament and the ministry had abjectly failed to establish by law. Well might the Irish patriots, having but the single and sincere purpose to redeem their country, come to the conclusion that there was no remedy which did not involve the employment of force.

The poets, who have been described as the "unauthorized legislators of the world," had long taught them "Hereditary bondsmen, know ye not who would be free themselves must strike the blow."

I personally felt the same emotion when I read of the shooting of Pearce and his brave and patriotic associates that I experienced when I read of the secret execution of Ferrer, the Spanish patriot, who had conspired in some way against the King. Patriots are killed because they have no means within the constitution to remedy intolerable conditions, and hence they are compelled to resort to conspiracies and overt acts. It is not a matter of choice. If constitutional rights are accorded them, there will be no need of violence.

We can not as Americans look with indifference upon these events, because if our emotions do not respond under such circumstances our own liberties and independence are in danger. We will have failed of our appreciation of those things for which our American revolutionists died.

Therefore, I repeat, in the name of humanity and liberty you should protest against these practices which all history, modern enlightenment, as well as political sagacity, condemn. From whatever point of view they are regarded, these executions can only be classified as crimes or as blunders. I am,

Respectfully, yours,

JAMES D. PHELAN.

43420—15729